

18th Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 20 - B September 26, 2018 – Dorian McGlannan

Martin Luther was a bit of a grump. Oh, he made wonderful contributions to Christian thinking and was an important and gutsy figure in the Reformation. His translation of the Bible from Latin into German allowed people to read the Bible all by themselves.

Imagine that! But there are a few things about Luther that I find irritating, one being his dislike of the book of James who he erroneously thought espoused the idea of having to earn our way into heaven. At any rate, that all seems to either have been resolved or possibly deemed unimportant to modern day Episcopalians who share a happy partnership with the Lutherans, including the ones down the street.

We heard a reading from James a short while ago and in fact have been reading from this epistle for the past few Sundays. A great deal of practical advice is given in this short but very important book of the Bible. There is no fluff from this down to earth writer. Unlike Paul who addressed very specific problems in particular churches: the church in Corinth, the church in Rome and so forth. James addressed Christians in general. Accepted into the Christian canon in the fourth century, a rather late date in comparison to other epistles, this letter was meant to be read by a broad community of believers. Today's text can be described as a collection of sayings against contentiousness.

My oh my, how relevant can we get? This letter cannot be more useful in today's world because of the constant reminder that only wisdom can prevail over contentiousness. Contentiousness is rampant in today's world. From the highest level of government, to business meeting rooms, to our communities, our churches, our families, our Facebook pages, to the streets on which we drive... We are exposed to contentiousness in every walk of life. Sadly wisdom is far more lacking. James tells us that the only way to mitigate contentiousness is through wisdom. What exactly is wisdom? What does it mean to be a wise person? I'm sure I do not need to tell you that wisdom has nothing to do with being smart or educated. Lots of people are very smart but not necessarily educated or wise; a fair number of people are smart and well educated but lacking in wisdom. And then there are those people, few and far between who are all three: smart, educated and wise. Some are well known: Parker Palmer, Henri Nouwen, Richard Rohr, Julian of Norwich, Esther de Wahl, Kathleen Norris... There are many wise and profound voices who speak to us today even though some lived hundreds of years ago. Other wise people might be your grandmother or your next door neighbor. There is no degree in wisdom, there are no particular credentials. People who are tuned into wisdom sometimes simply just know when they encounter someone who is wise. I don't know that wisdom can be taught, at least not in any traditional sense even though there are many wonderful books about wisdom; there is even a whole section of the Bible called the Wisdom Literature. But in the end, wisdom is best learned from other people. Being in a community with a significant number of wise people can provide the formation needed to weather the perils and challenges of life.

James addresses this so well in his letter. What is unique about the letter of James is that it is more like a collection of essays than a letter and unlike many other books of the Bible, context is not terribly important. We can take a verse here and a verse there and they stand alone very well whereas other Bible verses, many of which have caused great damage to people, must be read in context. Not so with James. James espouses the value of community and has a harsh condemnation of the self-aggrandizement that leads to the oppression of others. James' moral code has nothing to do with individual households. He doesn't say a word about sexual morality. He doesn't even say a thing about being nice to your parents. He does, however, wax eloquently about taking care of our neighbors near and far. He is also a great critic of gossip and has many pithy sayings, one of which just might resonate

with us given the perils of last summer. "How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire...it stains the whole body." James 3: 5b-6

So what do we do with all this contentiousness. I, like many of you, struggle with the daily headlines that in the past would only have appeared on rare occasions. It creates anxiety and tension for the best of us. So turning to James is not just helpful; it is a crucial reminder of how to survive in difficult times. Sometimes when I respond or react in ways that are not exactly charitable, I have to catch myself, stand back and think. "Well I'm not exactly sure Jesus would have responded in that way." Of course, we all know that Jesus had his moments of anger - can't forget the money changer incident in which Jesus turned tables over and threw the money changers out of the temple. That's the story we usually remember when we think of Jesus being angry. But perhaps today's gospel will also shed light on this whole issue of contentiousness.

The ninth chapter of Mark has a surprising twist. Jesus had no fewer issues among his disciples than we do in our our world today including our churches. In today's reading, the disciples were behaving very badly. Despite having spent a great deal of time with Jesus, they found themselves arguing about who was the greatest. What does Jesus do? He puts a child in the midst of them. He responds by echoing the sentiment of psalm 8:2 - "out of the mouths of babes and infants, you have founded a bulwark... to silence the enemy" (NRSV) or in the words offered by the ever delightful translation The Message: "Nursing infants gurgle choruses about you. Toddlers shout the songs that drown out enemy talk." Children are so interesting and provide such a rich layer of fabric to the thinking of adults. What I am trying to say is that children can often be wise beyond their years and offer perspectives that go beyond the highly controlled and structured thinking of most adults. Jesus saw this and trust me, children in Jesus' day were the side show, never center stage. Jesus broke through a cultural standard and told his disciples to welcome them, that the children were among the greatest, not these power hungry disciples who desperately needed reigning in. Like Jesus, we need to listen to the powerless. In the spirit of James' letter, we can try to spend as much times as possible with people who do impart wisdom and kindness. Let them shape us and mold us.

I must confess that I am a fairly strong news hound. I'm not like some of my friends who are on top of every tidbit of information. But I have to know what's going on. All of my spiritual teachers, whether in person or through books, emphasize that we cannot ignore what is going on in the world. Even people such as Thomas Merton who spent a good bit of his life in silence, had a strong understanding of the outside world. Just because he didn't talk a lot, doesn't mean he didn't read.

As a brand new resident on Whidbey, all of five weeks, I think a lot about how being on the island will enable me to remain engaged in the world and not escape it. As you well know, the island is a very healing place: the beauty of the natural world, the mostly courteous drivers, the voice of the sea, the songs of the birds. I am healed by these aspects of island life as well as the daily encounters with the deer that roam my neighborhood, the people in the various places of business that are becoming a part of my life. The people at the bank! Such sweet women. I am, however, also aware of how the island can foster escapism, a place to hide from the trials and tribulations of the world. Like Jesus who did spend time alone, or at least tried to, we need space to reflect. Those times of quiet are times to strengthen our souls to move forward in ways that will bring justice and healing to the world. Small ways - a kindness to a neighbor or big ways - calls to people in congress. It is fun to talk to the aids of our senators and representatives. They are often young people who are passionate about their work. In a balanced spiritual life quiet and engagement are both present.

James and Jesus point us in the direction of living a life deepened by the presence of God and the mentors who guide us whether they be seasoned spiritual directors or children who simply see more than we do. It's all there; we just have to look, listen and as is said in one of my favorite collects, "inwardly digest" these words of Jesus and of James.